

April 3, 2006: This Week in Congress

This Week in Congress

April 3, 2006

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Recognizing Members of Fort Riley's 3rd Brigade Combat Team

On Friday I joined Major General Dennis Hardy, Commanding General of Fort Riley's 24th Infantry Division, for an awards ceremony at Fort Riley to recognize the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division, Family Readiness Group leaders and community organizations for their achievements and support during the Brigade's one-year deployment to Iraq. Nearly 30 soldiers were awarded medals for their brave actions during service and several community organizations were honored with certificates of appreciation.

One of the community groups honored was the Patriot Guard. Hundreds of members were in attendance and I had the opportunity to meet a founder from Mulvane, Terry Houck. I recently introduced legislation, H.Res. 731, to commend the Patriot Guard Riders for shielding military families from protesters at funerals. Their service to the families of fallen soldiers allows the memories of the deceased service members to be remembered with the honor and dignity they deserve.

While in Iraq, the 3rd Brigade was responsible for the security of the Division's northern area of operations encompassing more than 800 square miles. The soldiers conducted a wide variety of missions, including infrastructure enhancement, the training of Iraq's security forces, and security during the October vote on the Iraqi constitution and the elections in December. The soldiers were serving in Baghdad when I visited there in January.

It was a privilege to attend the awards ceremony and to honor these heroes for their service to our country.

Working to Improve Access to Quality Care for Rural Veterans

This week I spoke at a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs concerning Project HERO (Healthcare Effectiveness through Resource Optimization), a pilot effort by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide health care services through non-VA providers and to better coordinate this care. Currently, veterans may use private health care providers on a limited basis when VA facilities cannot provide suitable care. Rural veterans, however, often must drive several hours one way to access VA health care, sometimes for routine services. In the Big First district, there are no VA hospitals.

Project HERO has the potential to increase the efficiency and access to health care for veterans, especially those living in rural areas. During the hearing, I applauded the Department's initiative and encouraged the VA to focus on high-quality contract care for rural veterans. A few Kansas counties are included in one of four regional VA health networks conducting Project HERO demonstrations, including Norton, Phillips, Smith, Jewell, Osborne and Washington counties.

I also encouraged the VA to incorporate into the demonstrations approaches for overcoming communication challenges between community physicians and the VA. A frequent complaint of Kansas physicians is the lack of communication between VA and community physicians, particularly regarding lack of medical record sharing for patients being seen in multiple systems. During this demonstration time, the VA should explore ways to improve the continuity of care between VA and non-VA providers and work to overcome communication barriers that persist.

Hearing from Georgia Producers about the 2007 Farm Bill

On Tuesday I chaired a field hearing of the Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management in Valdosta, Georgia, to review federal commodity programs in preparation for a new farm bill. Nine Members joined me for the hearing and at least 160 members of the community attended, including local producers and agribusiness leaders. The witnesses represented the diversity of Georgia's agricultural production including poultry, cotton, peanut, livestock, soybean, wheat, corn, fruit and vegetable producers. The producers spoke about a variety of farm policy issues including commodity programs, export markets, market access and crop insurance.

There are many challenges in today's farming and ranching environment: high input costs due to rising energy costs, more environmental regulation, and natural disasters that have wreaked havoc on crops, livestock and property. Good farm policy that provides a financial safety net in tough times is essential.

This was my Subcommittee's first in a series of hearings across the country to review various aspects of the 2002 Farm Bill which is set to expire in September 2007. We want to hear about what is working and what is not in the current farm bill and what can be improved upon. Rarely do we have an occupation in which generations of families work together side by side. We need to understand what types of policies are necessary to allow this way of life to continue.

I have added a new page to my website where anyone interested in agriculture policy can submit comments on the 2007 Farm Bill. Please share your thoughts by visiting <http://www.house.gov/moranks01/IMA/issue.htm>. These comments will be helpful to me and my colleagues as we draft this legislation.

Discussing Rural Development Programs with USDA Undersecretary Thomas Dorr

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Undersecretary for Rural Development Thomas Dorr visited my office this week to provide an update on activity of his agency. He later testified in front of the Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research in a hearing to review rural development programs and examine the rural development title of the 2002 Farm Bill. I am a member of this Subcommittee and we will be largely responsible for putting together the rural development portion of the next farm bill.

The Agriculture Committee provided an estimated \$870 million in the 2002 Farm Bill for programs such as rural broadcast and broadband services, rural strategic investment, and rural business investment as well as value-added market development grants and drinking water assistance grants. The Committee must determine how to continue reaching people in rural areas across the country through these programs.

I asked Undersecretary Dorr about USDA's reporting of farm income and what was actually on-farm income. Dorr said that of USDA's reported average farm family income, about 90 percent was from non-farm sources. I appreciate Mr. Dorr's efforts as Undersecretary and look forward to working with him to develop a farm bill that finds the proper balance of support between commodity programs and rural development programs.

Visiting Konza Prairie Community Health Center

En route home on Friday from Washington, D.C., I visited Konza Prairie Community Health Center in Junction City where I met with Lee Wolf, Director of the Center; Michael Dolan, Chief Operations Officer; Dr. Gregg Coup, Medical Director and Family Practitioner; Carissa McMahon, Physician's Assistant; and Shannon Jeffrey, Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner. Konza Prairie is a non-profit health clinic that provides primary health care services to all underserved populations. The group showed me around the center and updated me on their activities. They provide numerous services, including primary care, women and children's care, physicals and immunizations.

Community health centers provide access to medical care for the most vulnerable in our society. Nearly 75 percent of those served by the Konza Prairie Center are uninsured. For this reason, I have always encouraged support for the Community Health Centers Program.

Enjoying the Great Food at the Collyer Community Alliance Fish Fry

Robba joined me for a visit to Collyer again this week for the community fish fry. The Collyer Community Alliance Association is hosting a weekly fish fry to raise money for community development projects. This is a great example of community members coming together for a good cause and I enjoyed visiting with many people from the area.

I appreciated the invitation from Donna Malsom, President of the Collyer Community Alliance Association, to attend the fish fry. There are two more opportunities to enjoy the great food - Friday, April 7 and Friday, April 14 at 5:30 p.m. in the Depo Building in Collyer.

In the Office

Representatives of the American Student Dental Association visited my office this week to describe the shortage of dental care in Kansas and the need for expansion of student loan repayment programs. Paul Jones of La Crosse, Eric Johnson of Topeka, Angela Marion of Wichita and Joseph Laudie of Kansas City were in with the group. Linda Hickok of Belle Plaine, Beckie Hetrick of Garden City and Matt Theiss of Kansas City were in with the Kansas Society of Clinical Laboratory Scientists to talk about the growing shortage of lab professionals, especially in rural areas, and the need to keep labs in small hospitals open.

Dr. Donald and Kay Brada of Wichita were in representing the Kansas Psychiatric Society to advocate for increased Medicare reimbursement and more mental health professionals in rural areas. In to discuss foot care, including Medicaid coverage of podiatric care, were Dr. David Laha and Dr. Ken Hobbs of Overland Park, along with Dr. James Reeves of Lawrence.

Women Involved in Farm Economics representatives Melinda Sorem and Naomi King of Jetmore visited my office to discuss the group's priorities for the next farm bill and 2007 budget concerns, as well as other issues affecting rural Kansas. Ginger Lewman and Mary Yanik of Emporia and Kay Gibson of Wichita were in to advocate for the Kansas Association of the Gifted, Talented and Creative program. They talked about the need for continued Javits funding and the importance of supporting math, science and other enrichment programs for gifted children.

Jon Starns of Brewster, Lavern Wetzel of Kinsley and Richard Jones of Salina were in representing the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts to discuss 2007 budget concerns, proposed staff reductions and the need for Endangered Species Act reform. Ronald Walker, Dr. Larry Dixon, Lisa Osburn and LaMont Godsey of the Geary County School District were in to provide information about the impact the Base Realignment and Closure process is having on their school system and community. They anticipate adding more than 6,000 new school-aged youth in the next few years.

John Golden of Goodland visited my office to share the National Sunflower Association's concerns about the 2007 budget, specifically the need for continued funding of the USDA's Agricultural Research Service project involving sunflower research. Justin Sage of Madison and Ron Jueneman of Hanover were in to discuss topics important to Land Improvement Contractors, including the need to address the increasing costs of energy and healthcare for small businesses, as well as the need for adequate federal funding for small watersheds across the U.S.

From the State Association of Kansas Watersheds, Herbert (Herb) Graves of Chapman visited my office to voice his concern that the president's proposed budget cuts to funding for Kansas Watershed programs. Representatives of the Kansas Chiropractic Association visited my office this week to provide information about the need for veterans and current soldiers to have access to quality chiropractic services and also the need for chiropractors to be included in the Public Health Service Corps. Representatives included Jane Kelly and Dr. Charles Mossman of Topeka, Dr. Ed McKenzie of Holton, Dr. Tim Warren of Wichita, Dr. Gail Boyer from Lenexa and Dr. Kenyon Erickson of Manhattan.

Hewart Tillett, Jimmy Brown and Barrett Hatches of Kansas City; Lougene Marsh of Emporia; Marcia Hawkes and Lucy Corley of Salina; and Karla Finnell of Topeka were in the office representing the Kansas Association for the Medically Underserved to discuss successful programming, Medicaid payments and the continued need for Community Health Centers in Kansas. Philip Guries and Lise Ostenberg of Salina were in representing the Salina YMCA to talk about the benefits of YMCAs for communities. YMCAs not only provide opportunities for physical health improvement but also social and emotional benefits for members.

In representing the National Association of Health Underwriters were Bryan Riley and David Landwehr of Wichita, Paul Cook of Olathe and Tom Bryon of Leawood to discuss medical liability reform, long-term care insurance and consumer-directed health care. A group of high school students from Kensington, Agra, Logan and Almena were in to meet with me as part of their trip to Washington, D.C. Barbara Dennis of Phillipsburg accompanied the group. Sebastian Thomas of Dodge City was also in Washington, D.C., this week participating in the People to People World Leadership Forum.

Stanley Smith of Topeka visited my office as a representative of the Glass Association of America to express his concern about the National Fenestration Rating Council adopting a rating and certification program for commercial glazing that does not reflect the realities of the marketplace. Retired Colonel Robert Hadley, President of the Wichita Chapter of the Military Officers Association of American, stopped by to advocate for legislation I have sponsored to correct two major inequities in the military Survivor Benefit Plan and to talk about TRICARE proposals for military retirees in the 2007 budget.

Eric Guenther of Ottawa was in the office to discuss his concern regarding proposed 2007 budget cuts to Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan programs and the proposed fee increases that would result if current funding is not maintained. The increased fees would be passed down to both bankers and farmers. I have agreed to send a letter to the USDA in opposition to an FSA proposal that would increase fees for the FSA's guarantee loan program. In this week to explain issues important to bankers in Kansas were Mike Gibson of Paola, Mike Stevens of Sublette, Mike Fahrbach of Haven, Bruce Schriefer of Wichita and Chuck Stones of Topeka.

Kansas delegates to the National 4-H Conference came by the office to explain the importance of 4-H in their lives and communities. The delegates included Jessie Bulluck of Stilwell, Wesley Callahan of Baldwin, Torie Reilly of Cherryvale and Emily Schneider of Smolan. Justin Wiebers from Manhattan accompanied them on the visit. Mortgage brokers Dave Purdy of Leawood, Betty Wilken of Lenexa, Craig Yaryan of El Dorado and Shana Sowles of Overland Park were in to visit about federal legislation that establishes a uniform, national standard for investigation and notification of data security breaches and to discuss their support for federal legislation that reduces the incidence of abusive lending practices.

Joe Dick and Jim Epp of Kansas City and Mike Armstrong and Tom Schremp of Lenexa were in my office to talk about issues involving investment in water infrastructure, chemical facility security and degradation of the Missouri and Kansas River beds near Kansas City. In representing the Urban League of the Mid Plains were Brian Black and Linda Grant of Wichita to present the Urban League's 2006 "State of Black America Report" and to describe programs being offered in south central Kansas.

Rocky Nichols of Topeka was in to share how the Disability Rights Center of Kansas works to protect and champion the interests of Kansans with disabilities. Also in this week was Alex Kotoyantz of Junction City to discuss foreign policy issues relating to Armenia.

Members of the Kansas Livestock Association visited my office to give an account of current issues impacting the beef industry. Ron Estes of Atchison, David Cross of Lewis, Roger Black of Arkansas City, Jeff Sibley of Fowler, Todd Allen of Wichita, and Dee Likes and Matt Teagarden of Topeka voiced their support for excluding manure from regulation as a Superfund site, expanding foreign markets and freely entering marketing contracts.

Brenda Harvey-Smith of Wichita was in my office representing the Kansas Association of Marriage and Family Therapists to talk about Medicare reimbursement issues, including H.R. 1447, the Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act. Gary Shorman of Hays was in representing Eagle Cable to discuss the pending Telecommunication Reauthorization bill. Mr. Shorman shared his views on issues which directly affect cable television viewers and initiatives to bring broadband internet to more rural communities.

Several people stopped by my office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol. Kari Sue Vosburgh of Wichita came by with her daughters, Elly and Maddie. Donald and Trudy Eikenberry of Scott City and Bill and Sondra Popp of Hutchinson also came by for a tour, as did Joan Long of Hutchinson and Forrest Jacobs of Towanda.

Very truly yours,

Jerry